

Graduation Matters Missoula

Three-Year Strategic Plan Overview

August 2011 – August 2014

I. Introduction

We all can make a difference in students' lives! That is a core belief of Graduation Matters Missoula (GMM), a school/community partnership officially launched in January 2010 between Missoula County Public Schools and several Missoula businesses, nonprofit and service organizations. Graduation Matters Missoula has developed into a successful community-wide initiative that is focused on implementing innovative strategies that will significantly reduce the dropout rate in MCPS schools and ensure all students graduate. Graduation Matters Missoula specifically addresses one of the District's five main goals — that all students can achieve, regardless of abilities or circumstances — and is also a key program in the framework of the District's 21st Century Model of Education.



Forward Thinking, High Achieving.

II. Vision

Graduation Matters Missoula's vision is graduation for all students, regardless of their circumstances or abilities.

III. Mission

Graduation Matters Missoula endeavors to support a lasting, community-wide campaign to encourage students to successfully complete course work, culminating in graduation. The initiative is a broad-based effort to rally every sector of the community to remove barriers to graduation, address specific challenges that impede student success, and create an environment that enhances student learning. It is essential that each member of the community play a role in helping students graduate.

IV. Strategic Goals

Since its inception, Graduation Matters Missoula has been supported with the stakeholders group that represents a broad sector of the Missoula community. The initiative is coordinated by an Executive Committee that meets monthly and reports to a larger group of stakeholders each fall, winter and spring. There are five GMM subcommittees that execute the initiative's strategic plan — students, parents, school/staff, community and marketing/communications. These five subcommittees develop and implement action plans in support of GMM long-term and short-term goals. The subcommittees are comprised of members of the stakeholders group, as well as additional parents, educators and other individuals in the community.



Advice that inspires

"Katie Geoghan is my most inspirational person in my whole high school career. I say this because I have seen it through the toughest times in Sentinel High. One of her sayings is pretty common for someone to say, but it has a little twist on it. She says, 'When you come to this classroom you put the drama outside of class. You come here every day and get to be silly and you can also forget about the world outside of drama class for about 49 minutes.' This saying has helped me through high school because I go into any class and forget about what is going on outside of that class."

- Sentinel student Brian Harris thanking teacher Katie Geoghan

A. Long-Term Goals

Graduation Matters Missoula is a long-term initiative focused on achieving 100 percent graduation by addressing these broad goals:

- Fully develop effective strategies in MCPS schools and throughout the community that engage students, increase relevancy of coursework, enhance students' learning experiences, and create alternative pathways to achieving graduation.
- Support collaborative partnerships with schools, organizations, businesses and individuals to address specific barriers to graduation and improve student wellness.
- Engage all sectors of the Missoula community in creating the vision of 100 percent graduation.
- Support the Graduation Matters Montana Initiative to increase the rate of Montana students graduating from high school — career ready; establish a support network between schools, businesses and community organizations for student success; and create school-based and community-based opportunities for student success.

B. Short-Term Goals: 2011-2012 School Year

Through the GMM strategic planning process (see Appendix II), three key areas were identified by stakeholders as needing attention in the 2011-12 school year: 1) improve attendance; 2) more fully engage parents and the community; and 3) address student wellness issues (physical and mental health of students). The five GMM subcommittees will develop detailed goals and action plans to address these three key areas during the 2011-12 school year:

- **Improve attendance** - promote the importance of regular school attendance, and work to improve the attendance of students who face specific challenges that impair their ability to attend classes consistently and on time.
- **Engage Parents and Community** - collaborate with parents and community members to increase opportunities for students to become more engaged through volunteerism, internships, job shadows, and other real-world experiences. In addition, develop a volunteer recruitment program at MCPS that successfully matches community volunteers with service opportunities in the public schools.
- **Enhance Student Wellness** – work with students, staff, parents and community members to identify and implement strategies that will significantly improve the physical and mental health of students.

The goals and action plans developed by each subcommittee should include a timeline, necessary resources and evidence of progress. During the summer (or annually), each subcommittee will review its action plans and make revisions to continue to support existing goals and/or new goals identified for the upcoming school year.

V. Conclusion

Graduation Matters Missoula has and will continue to be a priority initiative at Missoula County Public Schools. In the first 18 months that the initiative operated, the District experienced a 46-percent reduction in the number of students that dropped out of MCPS from the 2008-2009 school year to the 2009-2010 school year. While MCPS



GMM Launch, January 2010

A non-traditional path

"At the beginning of this year, I had a pretty reasonable goal of what I wanted to be when I grow up ... After a few morning talks with Anneke, and a lot of journaling, I decided I wanted to be more than that, I wanted more of a challenge. I wanted to be more helpful in the world and I wanted to just jump into it all. With the help of Anneke, I discovered that I want to be a surgical technician, I wanted to go to college, and get a real degree. I started telling people, and I found out about a little program called The Lifelong Learning Center, and I signed up for the class Medical Terminology. Right now, I am about halfway through and I am passing! I have enjoyed going to class, it reassures me that I am doing something I want."

- Willard student
Summer Shonk
thanking teacher
Anneke Hilvert

implemented strategies in schools to ensure that educators identified and assisted every student at risk for dropping out, GMM worked tirelessly to bring the issues of dropout prevention and graduation into the minds of students, staff, parents, community members and Missoula's business sector. In 2009 and 2010, GMM promoted "100 percent graduation" as a goal that the entire community could come together to support. The message: Every student deserves a quality education that will provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in any post-graduate job, training program or college.

Graduation is a stepping stone – high school graduates, on average, earn 20 percent more annually than students who drop out of high school. Communities such as Missoula will need an educated work force if they are to attract businesses, create jobs and improve their overall economy.

For additional information about this strategic plan, please contact:

www.graduationmattersmissoula.org
728-2400, ext. 1024

VI. Additional Documents

- Appendix I – Background and History of Graduation Matters Missoula Initiative
- Appendix II – Strategic Planning Process
- Appendix III – Executive Committee Membership (as of August 2011)



GMM poster created to encourage students to graduate

Appreciating a teacher

"Our 10-year old daughter began working with Mrs. Sullivan at Rattlesnake Elementary after we transferred her to MCPS at the beginning of third grade. Learning to read, spell and write in the normal classroom had been challenging for our daughter, a dyslexic student. She began third grade without yet having achieved a second grade reading level. Mrs. Sullivan succeeded in earning our daughter's trust, making learning fun and helping her succeed. Her partnership with our family contributed to our daughter's achieving a third grade reading level when she began fourth grade...we're so happy to have a daughter who now loves to read."

- a grateful parent

Appendix I

Background & History

During his first year in the District (2008-2009), Superintendent Alex Apostle collaborated with MCPS principals and teachers to implement new strategies to reduce dropout rates and focus on keeping students in school. The graduation rates for MCPS high schools had varied over the past few years between 78 and 84 percent. Through these discussions, it was acknowledged that many students were challenged in their efforts to graduate by specific barriers, and that some of these barriers could be better addressed with the assistance of community agencies and nonprofit organizations. In addition, research indicated that students felt disconnected from their learning – they failed to see the relevance of their coursework, and they were somewhat bored with the traditional methods of teaching and learning.

The early concept of GMM developed through a series of conversations primarily between MCPS Superintendent Apostle, the Rotary Club of Missoula, and other local organizations in summer and fall 2009. Through a series of meetings, the individuals involved decided that an initiative with one primary message and focus – that every student needs to graduate – was necessary to engage school employees, trustees, parents, businesses and others to collaborate to address the issue. The project was titled “Graduation Matters Missoula.”

On January 19, 2010, the group (which had grown into a committee of about 40 stakeholders representing broad sectors of Missoula) launched the initiative with a community-wide/media event at the University of Montana’s Phyllis J. Washington College of Education and Human Sciences. Four smaller subcommittees were formed to focus on key groups of stakeholders – students, parents, schools/staff, and community.

During the next 18 months, the efforts of subcommittees resulted in:

- Formation of a special “on-time graduation” committee at each high school that identifies students with unique needs who are at risk to not graduate on time, and takes steps to intervene and assist the student and their family. These efforts may include connecting the family to resources in the community that can provide support.
- Researching systems to more effectively utilize community volunteers in schools to increase student engagement and work with MCPS to build a more effective volunteer program.
- Continuing projects to publicize the importance of graduation, both in schools and the community, including a website, Facebook, informational brochures, posters, banners, TV public service announcements, and booths at the Kids Fair at Southgate Mall and the Western Montana State Fair in Missoula.

In fall 2010, GMM initiated a strategic planning process to create a plan that would define and sustain the initiative. GMM sponsored a series of community meetings in fall 2010 to collect data, and followed up with a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis to identify key priorities. One of the first priorities identified was the need to more clearly define the leadership structure of the initiative. With such a large committee supporting the initiative, it was difficult to identify common goals and responsibilities. The “informal” structure of leadership had become less effective as the initiative became more defined and active.

As a result, MCPS identified a group of 10-12 individuals to serve on an Executive Committee to oversee the initiative day-to-day. The committee was comprised of MCPS administrators, MEA president (teachers’ union), and representation from United Way, Rotary, Missoula Forum for Children and Youth, and the business sector. The executive committee began to meet regularly in March 2011 to complete the strategic plan.

At that time, it was also decided that the broad stakeholders group (comprised of all of the individuals who had been active in the GMM initiative thus far) would meet each fall, winter and spring to receive progress reports on GMM goals and provide feedback and guidance. In addition, many individuals on the stakeholders group would be involved on the five GMM subcommittees that meet regularly to develop and implement action plans for the 2011-12 goals identified in the GMM Three-Year Strategic Plan Overview. The executive committee finalized the GMM Three-Year Strategic Plan Overview in August 2011.

2009 - 2011

***Congratulations Graduation Matters Missoula!** In April, GMM was selected as the winner of a 2011 Magna Award. Magna Awards, co-sponsored by the American School Board Journal, the National School Boards Association, and Sodexo School Services, honor best practices and innovative programs that advance student learning. The awards recognize educational programs that feature strong collaborations between trustees, schools and the community, and encourage innovative approaches to public education.*



Forward Thinking. High Achieving.

Graduation Matters Missoula: Our History

It's about supporting and engaging students – and helping them stay in school so they will successfully complete their education. This is GRADUATION MATTERS MISSOULA.






Graduation Matters Missoula is a community-wide partnership between Missoula County Public Schools and area parents, students, businesses, service groups, faith organizations and the University of Montana, focused on a goal of 100 percent student graduation!


























Graduation Matters Missoula began in August 2009 when several individuals and organizations came together to work with the District to develop programs and strategies that would increase the MCPS graduation rate and reduce the number of students dropping out of school. The campaign was officially launched in January 2010.





Graduation Matters Missoula directly supports one of the District's five main goals – achievement and graduation for all students, regardless of their circumstances and abilities. Early action was focused on involving all sectors of the community, increasing public awareness (website, posters, PSAs, etc), and collecting data to identify barriers to graduation. At the same time, the District implemented program strategies in schools to identify and provide immediate assistance to students who were at risk for dropping out. Most recently, GMM has focused on developing a long-term strategic plan to support students, parents and educators.









This historical timeline provides a narrative of past and current events associated with Graduation Matters Missoula. It is a long-term partnership, not a "one-shot" effort. While the work continues, this document serves as an opportunity to celebrate past achievements and recognize future challenges. Campaign strategies will evolve and change, but Graduation Matters Missoula is here to stay.

For additional information, please call 728-2400, ext. 1024, or visit www.graduationmattersmissoula.org.

August 2009	September 2009	October 2009	November 2009	December 2009
 <p>First meeting of volunteer team comprising school district personnel, including administrators, teachers and principals; parents, students, the business community, nonprofit partners, the University of Montana, The Rotary Club of Missoula, and the faith community</p>	 <p>GMM Steering Committee Meeting</p>	 <p>GMM Steering Committee Meeting</p>	 <p>GMM Steering Committee Meeting</p>	 <p>GMM Steering Committee Meeting</p>

January 2010	February 2010	March 2010	April 2010	May 2010	June 2010
 City of Missoula proclaims January 19, 2010, Graduation Matters Missoula Day	 GMM Steering Committee Meeting	 GMM Steering Committee Meeting	 GMM Steering Committee Meeting	 GMM Steering Committee Meeting	 GMM Strategic Planning Meeting
 Graduation Matters Missoula Day	 GMM importance of attendance age-based fliers shared through MCPS principals	 GMM booth at Kids Fair at Southgate mall	 Student Assistance Foundation donates \$5,000 to GMM	 GMM Volunteer usage and resource needs survey rolled out to all MCPS teachers	 Sophia Lambros donates \$1,000 to GMM
 Press Conference and Rally to launch GMM initiative	 Applied for a volunteer service grant from Wells Fargo	 Community resource training at Big Sky H.S. in partnership with The Forum	 Community resource training at Big Sky H.S. in partnership with The Forum	 Second set of public service announcements on television and radio	 GMM Parent Focus Group
 <u>graduationmattersmissoula.org</u> website launched	 First set of GMM public service announcements on television and radio	 Community resource training at Big Sky H.S. in partnership with The Forum	 Community resource training at Big Sky H.S. in partnership with The Forum	 Second set of public service announcements on television and radio	 GMM Parent Focus Group
					 OPI plans to Model GMM as Graduation Matters Montana

July 2010	August 2010	September 2010	October 2010	November 2010	December 2010
 Applied for a grant from the Rotary Club of Missoula	 GMM Strategic Planning Meeting	 Received \$1,000 volunteer service grant from Wells Fargo	 GMM community Meetings facilitated to collect feedback from the community	 Aventa credit recovery program made available at Sentinel High School with support from GMM	 GMM Strategic Planning Meeting
 Number of students that dropped out of school between June 2009 and June 2010 was reduced by 47%	 GMM Booth at Western Montana Fair and Rodeo	 GMM Importance of attendance posters including MCPS staff and student images distributed to all schools	 GMM meeting with all school principals to discuss ways we can partner to improve graduation rates.	 GMM Facebook page launched	
 Attendance policy and supporting administrative procedures rewritten with support from GMM	 Large GMM banners provided to all MCPS schools to promote community awareness of the initiative	 Washington Corporation-Montana Rail Link donates \$2,500 to GMM	 Family Connections Night in partnership with The Forum	 Applied for American School Board Journal Magna Award	

January 2011	February 2011	March 2011	April 2011	May 2011	June 2011
 <p>January 19, 2011, Graduation Matters</p>	 <p>Strategic Planning Meeting</p>	 <p>Executive Committee Meeting</p>	 <p>Executive Committee Meeting</p>	 <p>Executive Committee Meeting</p>	 <p>Executive Committee Meeting</p>
<p>Missoula Day</p> <p>Press Conference and Rally to celebrate one-year anniversary of the GMM initiative</p>	 <p>Applied for a grant from the Murdock Foundation</p> <p>GMM wins American School Board Journal Magna Award</p>	 <p>Exchange Club donates \$200 to GMM</p>	 <p>Community resource workshop at Washington M.S. in partnership with The Forum</p>	 <p>GMM sponsored MCPS employees who made a difference Missoulian and GMM website campaign</p>	
 <p>United Way of Missoula County donates \$10,000 to GMM initiative, made possible by a gift from St. Patrick Hospital and Health Sciences Center</p>	 <p>Aventura credit recovery program made available to Big Sky, Hellgate and Willard High Schools with support from GMM</p>		 <p>GMM featured in the American School Board Journal</p>		

Appendix II

The Strategic Planning Process

Beginning in October 2010, Graduation Matters Missoula hosted a number of events and meetings to gather information from community members, Missoula County Public Schools employees, and members of the Graduation Matters Missoula stakeholders group. With the help of a local facilitator, GMM gathered large amounts of data on what people perceive as barriers to graduation, and organized that information into general categories. Through further meetings, the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of the initiative were discussed, and recurring themes and important categories were decided on by the Executive Committee. The data gathered from these meetings directly informed the process by which the Executive Committee chose the main focus areas for the 2011-12 school year. The following information outlines the dates, process and outcomes of these meetings.

Community Input Sessions – Oct. 6, 2010

In October, GMM held two community input sessions to pose the question: “What are the obstacles to graduation and how can we help students overcome them?” The three-hour sessions, one in the afternoon and one in the evening, produced a large amount of feedback on areas from substance abuse to the structure of education. Participants in the sessions were first asked to write what they perceive as obstacles to graduation on Post-It Notes, then place them scattered across a row of flip charts. The notes were then organized by waves of participants into collective groups combining like ideas. The group cast weighted votes on their top three topics, and the one with the most votes was the topic of a brainstorming session to determine how Graduation Matters Missoula can specifically address one key obstacle to graduation. The top categories of obstacles that came out of these meetings were: Relevance in curriculum, lack of family support, connections, substance abuse, attendance, community support and family issues – among others.

MCPS Principal Meeting – Oct. 7, 2010

In a meeting facilitated by the GMM Schools/Staff subcommittee and the MCPS Executive Regional Directors, MCPS principals from all school levels (K-12) participated in a popcorn-style brainstorming session on ways the subcommittee could support the schools. The question posed was: “What do your schools need that could help increase student retention/graduation?” Ideas shared at this meeting include: District-wide connection person, how do we stay connected with all kids, parents supporting parents, flexibility in school-day times, bring the attendance issue to the public’s awareness – among others.

SWOT Session – Dec. 9, 2010

In December, members of the Graduation Matters Missoula steering committee gathered to brainstorm on strengths and weaknesses of the organization as it enters the strategic planning stage. The group generated ideas on Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, then classified each idea into larger categories. Categories that came from this discussion included: Community support (strength), parent/community school engagement (weakness), attendance pathways/policy (opportunities), and student risk factors (threats) – among others.

SWOT Ranking – Jan. 27, 2011

In a follow-up meeting in January, members of the Stakeholders Group reviewed the weighted ranks of the SWOT that was gathered through an online survey and added additional votes to the process. From this, the top-ranked Strengths were: MCPS staff and community support; Weaknesses: Money/funding for GMM and limited family resources; Opportunities: GMM structure and MCPS attendance policy; Threats: Student risk factors and lack of clarity.

Executive Committee Review – February through July 2011

To most effectively review the information gathered through these meetings and determine a course for the initiative, an Executive Committee of some long-time GMM members and some new members began meeting in February. This committee held monthly meetings to discuss the information that was previously compiled, and decided on three main focus areas for the 2011-12 school year: Attendance, Engaging Parents and the Community, and Student Wellness.

Appendix III

Executive Committee

The leadership and management of Graduation Matters Missoula is guided by an Executive Committee comprised of Missoula County Public Schools key administrators and representatives from the Missoula United Way, Missoula Rotary Club(s), Chamber of Commerce/Business Community, Missoula Forum for Children and Youth, Flagship, Missoula City-County Health Department, Missoula Education Association, Montana Campus Compact VISTA Program, parents and other key sectors of the community. In addition, this committee collaborates with a group of stakeholders that meets in fall, winter and spring, and includes broad representation from parents, educators, students and other community groups. The Executive Committee will seek guidance from stakeholders and collaborate on various projects in support of the GMM initiative.

As of August 2011, participating members of the GMM Executive Committee include:

Community

Rosie Buzzas - The Flagship Program (Non-profit)
Melanie Charlson - Missoula Education Association (Union)
Nina Cramer - Missoula Forum for Children and Youth (Missoula County)
Leslie Halligan - Missoula County Attorney's Office (Missoula County)
Mo Karlin - University of Montana Office for Civic Engagement (UM student)
Natalie Mauer - Wells Fargo Bank (Parent/Business community)
Susan Hay Patrick - United Way of Missoula County (Non-profit)
Tom Severson - Community Bank (Chamber/Business community)
Vacant - Missoula City-County Health Department

Missoula County Public Schools

Karen Allen - MCPS Executive Regional Director
Lesli Brassfield - MCPS Public Affairs Director
Heather Davis Schmidt - MCPS Executive Regional Director
Marianne Moon - MCPS Safe Schools Director
Mark Thane - MCPS Executive Regional Director
Bess Pallares - Partners in Education AmeriCorp VISTA (in partnership with Montana Campus Compact)